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SUBJECT: OIC BRINGS FOCUS TO ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC
WORLD

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) held a conference November 20-21 in Istanbul on the role of women in OIC societies, following through on a commitment made last year by OIC Foreign Ministers to focus attention on the need for legislative reforms and new initiatives to address gender inequality in Islamic countries. The Istanbul conference looked at the need for member states to eradicate poverty and how a focus on employment of women could help to address that. Participants also discussed the need to eliminate all forms of violence against women, to provide equal access to education for girls/women, and to enhance the participation of women in decision-making. The conference kicks off what the OIC hopes will be a major new focus of addressing the needs of women in member states. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) The Organization of the Islamic Conference has initiated a new focus on women's issues, organizing the first OIC conference on "The Role of Women in the Development of OIC Member States," which took place November 20-21 in Istanbul. We received a read-out of the conference December 1 from MFA Department Head for International Political Organizations Zeynep Kiziltan. According to Kiziltan, the conference was fairly well-attended, with delegations from 43 of the OIC's 57 member states participating. Most delegations were led by women.

¶3. (SBU) The conference came about as a recommendation issued by the 32nd OIC Foreign Ministers' conference that took place in June 2005 in Sana'a, Yemen. According to Kiziltan, Turkey decided to host the meeting in December 2005 to ensure planning for it advanced and took the lead in determining the final agenda. There were four main areas of discussion at the meeting, namely:

- eradication of poverty/employment of women;
- women's participation in decision-making;
- access to education for girls/women; and
- elimination of violence against women

¶4. (U) The host of the conference, Turkish State Minister in charge of Women and Family Affairs Nimet Cubukcu, underlined in her introductory remarks to conference participants the need to involve both women and men in the development of all nations. She pointed out that development models that disregard women have been shown to be inefficient and, in the long run, ineffective in alleviating poverty and establishing social justice. Cubukcu also noted major challenges lie in the increasing inequality of remuneration that women receive and described Turkey's own efforts to enact constitutional and legislative amendments with a view toward developing a

comprehensive strategy to better the lives of Turkish women.

15. (U) Both OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan stressed in their statements the need for Islamic states to continue to focus on the needs of their female citizens and pointed out the urgency in making progress on this goal in light of the adoption of the OIC's Ten-Year Program of Action last December in Mecca. That program put in place a plan to eliminate poverty and eradicate all forms of discrimination against women. Erdogan criticized the oppression of women under the pretext of faith and religion, adding that Islam does not prevent women from participating in all aspects of modern society and that "the problem lies in traditions which appear or are perceived to derive from religion whereas they have no relation whatsoever to it."

16. (SBU) Kiziltan said a major focus of discussion involved the need to promote laws in member states aimed at strengthening the advancement of women in Islamic societies in economic, cultural, social, and political fields. However, she noted that although the discussion was lively ("not that many long boring prepared speeches"), little new ground was turned over. Nonetheless, Kiziltan stressed that even if the conference produced "nothing spectacular," the fact that it happened at all was encouraging.

17. (SBU) Conference delegates were unable to come to agreement in Istanbul on the text of a declaration, according to Kiziltan, but OIC staff is circulating a document that it hopes to have finalized before the end of the year. She hopes the document will help establish a framework through which follow-on action on the issue can be planned. Kiziltan expects an experts group will be formed as a follow-on mechanism and an action plan will be adopted as well.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although Turkey has been deeply involved in

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the initial stages of getting this initiative off the ground through organization of this initial conference, Turkey's MFA does not anticipate it will continue to be at the center of driving it forward. We leave it to our colleagues in Jeddah to determine the degree to which OIC Secretariat General staff will be able to keep the momentum going.

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